New York welfare offices recruit potential strikebreakers

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New York City's Human Resources Administration (HRA) circulated fliers last week to welfare beneficiaries asking them to work as doormen during a possible strike by doormen and other building workers. The notice was one of many that are routinely distributed to welfare recipients who are required to work for the city for their benefits.

Debra Sproles, a spokesperson for the HRA, denied knowing how the flier might have been sent out. She said that when the Burns International Security Services had asked the administration to hire welfare recipients they had turned the company down because it is against the HRA's official policy to recruit strikebreakers.

The flier advertised a weekly salary of $848 for working a 12-hour shift, seven days a week. It stressed that applicants “must be able to handle crowd control, possible aggressive strikers, etc.”

The contract between the building landlords and the union representing doorman, handymen, concierges, porters, cleaning and maintenance workers expires April 20. A spokesman for the union representing 50,000 building workers, Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International union, said. “It certainly appears that to us that this is for strikebreaking purposes. And the city should not be involved in recruiting for this kind of activity.” The SEIU local representing janitors in Los Angeles walked off the job April 7, joining maintenance workers who were already on strike.

A spokesperson for Burns explained that their company is in competition with many others to obtain workers to fulfill their contractual obligation with the building landlords. They said that they filed their request with the city's Business Link that was established by the Giuliani administration in 1995, which allows companies to hire welfare recipients.

A spokesperson for the reality advisory board that represents the 2,000 buildings that would be affected by a strike reacted favorably to the concept of using welfare recipients as scabs, while unionized doormen have expressed sharp opposition to the city's tactics.

This unofficial policy of recruiting strikebreakers is the logical culmination of an earlier agreement that the city unions established with Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. This involved the establishment of the city's Work Experience Program (WEP), which compels welfare recipients to do the same work as municipal workers for their welfare checks. This has resulted in the replacement of thousands of unionized city workers with the cheap labor of those forced into the WEP program. The unions collaboration with this scheme continued in the last mayoral election when most of the city unions endorsed and assisted Giuliani's successful reelection bid.

The exact circumstances surrounding the distribution of the HRA flier are not clear. But a city agency has helped advertise for strikebreakers at a time when Giuliani is making ever more provocative and right-wing statements. In addition to his well-publicized defense of police violence, he threatened transit workers with severe punishment at the time of their contract dispute and recently attacked the city's teachers in insulting terms. Giuliani, unable to run for mayor for a third term, is in a race for the US Senate against Hillary Rodham Clinton. Polls indicate that he would lose in New York City by a substantial margin. Giuliani, as part of a cynical and obvious effort to woo the most right-wing elements in the state, seems intent on cultivating his unpopularity in the city.

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